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High-tech warfare: some lessons from Mideast, Falklands

Initiative, superior weaponry,
reconnaissance data prevail

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High above the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon, Israeli and Syrian jets duelled fiercely in the most intense dogfight since World War II. Half a world away, Argentine and British troops slugged it out in the mud and bitter cold in a classic infantry and artillery engagement.

As military experts piece through the recent fighting in the Mideast and the South Atlantic, they find striking similarities in the lessons to be learned.

Some are as new as Battlestar Gallactica, others as old as Thermopylae. But in all the important areas of warfighting — strategy, tactics, logistics, intelligence, training, relations between officers and troops, morale and the use of psychological weaponry — there were important differences between the opponents that proved crucial.

In the Middle East in particular, the United States and the Soviet Union are gaining new information on the effectiveness of their weapons used by Israel and Syria. The initial evidence is that US-made armaments (especially where refined and used with considerable expertise) can prevail over Soviet-built systems and tactics.

"High technology is the name of the game," says Dr. William Taylor, director of political-military studies at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Some experts say that during the battle over the Falkland Islands, the loss of the British destroyer Sheffield to one of Argentina's sophisticated French missiles showed that ships without adequate individual defensive capabilities, or sufficient long-range interceptors are very vulnerable.

In the Bekaa Valley of Lebanon, Syrian SA-6 anti-aircraft missiles and MIG fighters were overwhelmed by Israeli airpower featuring sophisticated airborne command centers, ECM (electronic counter measures) capabilities, and precision guided munitions.

Israel has four American-built E-2C Hawkeye aircraft, which (like the AWACS) can detect enemy planes as they leave the runway, pinpoint radar emissions from surface-to-air missile sites, and direct their own fighter and attack forces, with great effect. Britain had no such capability in the South Atlantic, and may have suffered much of its heavy naval losses due to this lack.

Both Israel and Britain apparently had better tactical information to guide their advances, and did the unexpected. Britain did not

make a massive invasion at Port Stanley, as had been earlier hinted. Israel did not stop its push north into Lebanon at the 25-mile point as was its stated goal.

"The value of intelligence and long-range reconnaissance was crucial in both campaigns," said Dr. Taylor.

Both sides also made use of psychological warfare. Britain found and broadcast on Argentine frequencies, and Israel dropped leaflets over Beirut. The British reportedly dropped leaflets containing safe conduct passes on Argentines at Stanley.

The value of training and alliances also was illustrated in both areas, points out former US Central Intelligence Agency director Stansfield Turner.

Britain has participated in many NATO exercises, and Harrier pilots trained against French Mirages (the kind of aircraft they would be later encountering in Argentina) and American F-15s, before leaving for the South Atlantic. Israel has taken part in "Red Flag" exercises in the US where "aggressor" pilots simulate Soviet air tactics.

The value of actual combat experience and a tactical doctrine that values individual initiative also was shown in the South Atlantic and the Mideast.

So too was the value placed on the individual soldier, as well as the worth of a professional corps of officers and enlisted men.

"Britain has highly professional, all-volunteer services, whereas a conscript army never is the same," notes Brookings Institution military analyst Michael McGwire.

Superior unit cohesion and leadership also were demonstrated by the British and the Israelis, military experts observe.

"The Argentine military — and I would assume the PLO — is based on an authoritarian structure where individual soldiers are treated almost as a material good or asset. There is a lack of respect by the officers for the values, well-being, hopes, and fears of their soldiers," says Dr. Taylor. "The reverse is true for the British and Israeli armed forces where unit cohesion is based on taking care of your soldiers."

For the US Navy, the most important lesson may have to do with using aluminum in the superstructure of warships. As the British learned, aluminum may be lighter, but it melts much more readily than steel. Heritage Foundation military analyst Jeffrey Barlow notes that the US makes even greater use of aluminum than the British, "which says that our ships are less survivable today than they were 20 years ago."

"It's going to call for drastic rethinking on the part of the US Navy," says Dr. Barlow.